

A Walk through the Woods

Something this important should really have happened in a moment of Epiphany. The light-bulb should have flickered on above my head and I would have realized what I loved. Yet, my passion did not just appear, it was something that slowly built up over the course of my entire life. It was the product of countless walks in the woods next to an eighty year old man who changed my life.

My grandfather, Carl Bardman doesn't really talk very much and probably has no idea that he helped me discover my passion. "This is a beech tree," he would say as we walked together in the Northern Pennsylvania Mountains, "this is a cherry, and this one is a poplar." I repeated what "Pop" said and memorized the names as we hiked together to his destination several miles into the woods from his farmhouse. Working almost silently, he showed me the right way to plant acorns and put metal surrounds on the oak saplings, to grow as many oaks as possible on his property.

He would take me to the orchard on the farm to pick apples for cider, show me the trees he used to make maple syrup, point out the wood that makes excellent furniture, go fishing, bird watch, hike and pick blueberries with me. At times also it felt like slave labor as Pop asked me to cut down tree after tree, one time in particular to clear trees to open an old logging trail. I couldn't figure out why we cut down one tree while leaving another right beside it, and finally I gathered the courage to question Pop about the logic of what we were doing. He told me that we had to leave certain trees so they could drop their seeds to feed the animals and grow new trees, to give back to the environment.

At first, I did these things because I was told to do them, and because he was my grandfather, and because I wanted to please him. But, one day driving back home from a weekend with Pop, I found myself teaching the name and identification of trees to my family. I bought a tree book and every time I did not recognize a certain tree, I looked it up in the guide. During my freshmen year, I joined the Grassroots Environmental Organization in my school, and two years later became its president. That same year, I was chosen to compete on the Envirothon (academic environmental competition), and last summer I was awarded a scholarship to attend the American Wilderness Leadership School in Wyoming.

It is a simple thing to write on the application form that I am interested in environmental science, and that I intend that to be my major. What is not simple is to somehow communicate how much this eighty- year- old man and his walks in the woods have meant to his grandson. My experiences with him were the stones of an arch and he himself was the keystone. Pop was the person who helped me find my passion and discover myself in the process. What he taught me on those walks will continue to grow in me for the rest of my life.